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Response: Ethical and Political Challenges in Environmental and Sustainability Education Research – The Case for ‘Abnormal Discourse’

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Introduction

This paper sets out to draw together a number of themes shared by four papers, three of which appear in this publication (Kopnina and Cherniak; Pashby and Andreotti; Sund; and Van Poeck, Goeminne and Vandenabeele). It is the discussant’s proper role to raise questions about other people’s texts, as well as to draw together themes and issues for the benefit of readers. In the present writer’s view that enterprise is most successful when it is both appreciative and challenging. I do intend to be challenging, and so would like to begin by saying that all four papers, in their treatment of related topics, do great credit both to their authors and to the field of environmental and sustainability education. It is true that a number of the matters addressed in these papers have been previously tackled by other authors, and/or have been a source of puzzlement, theorization or assertion by academics and others for a long time. It is also true that one should expect that to be the case within an academic enterprise that deals with such enduring concerns as education and the natural world. However, in every case something new, and fresh, is added by the works presented here: and coming up with new insights is a much harder thing to do than revisiting old ones.

The frame of reference employed in what follows as a means of relating the papers is Richard Rorty’s (1979/2009) concept of ‘abnormal discourse’. For Rorty, the maintenance of challenge to established artefacts of thought that most people consider to be certain, self-evident and beyond question (i.e. challenge to ‘normal discourse’: the terminology is, of course, borrowed from Thomas Kuhn) is crucial, whatever those artefacts of thought happen to be at any particular time and place. Consistent with this, I am not trying to be ‘right’ but merely to be, to use Rorty’s term, ‘edifying’.

A fuller discussion of Rorty in this context will be found in Gough (2015). However, the point is well illustrated by an issue that is a primary focus of concern for the paper by Kopnina and Cherniak.

Ecocentrism

Kopnina and Cherniak make the case for what they call ‘inclusive pluralism’ in education for sustainable development, where this term stands in contrast to the much more commonly-occurring ‘anthropocentric pluralism’ by virtue of its extension of rights to other species. They claim that we could teach *for* sustainability, choosing for a true integration of economic and ecological interests, without subordinating the latter to the former and that EE/ESD courses could teach – and even advocate – ecological justice for all species. This is an argument with clear implications for the other three papers, since it must bear on matters such as educational ethics (Pashby and Andreotti),

democracy (Van Poeck et al.) and justice (Sund). Of course, debates about the meaning of – or even the possibility of – people being ecocentric have been around for a long time. Lovelock's 'Gaia' proposition, for example, was published in 1979. A number of philosophical problems for ecocentrism remain unresolved, of which perhaps the most challenging is to show that any such thing is possible, given that concepts such as 'rights', 'justice' and so on exist nowhere except in human minds and language. There is no happy, default, Garden-of-Eden state of affairs that would come into being if only we humans stopped disrupting things: if humans act differently because they become convinced that they should accord rights to animals, then they are still acting and still changing things, not because they have heard the voices of the animals but because they, as humans, want to bring about change in ways that they, as humans, presently happen to like.

There are some other, less abstract problems. Firstly, in their claim above it is assumed that 'economic and ecological interests' can always be integrated. It is far from clear that this is so. Secondly, the temptation of associating all bad things with neoliberalism proves too much on occasion. So, for example, when they talk about the illusion that humans are superior to other species it is something that has been around much longer than neo-liberalism and at least since the writing of the Book of Genesis (whether it really is an illusion or not depends mostly on what you mean by 'superior'). Thirdly, there are occasional slips in criticality. For example, Kopnina and Cherniak are correct that it is no longer acceptable to advocate slavery, and also right to say that education has played a role in making this so: but that doesn't mean that there isn't any slavery now – there most certainly is. The question is, how much of a substantive change has been achieved, and how far do we just mistake a change in what decent people may say for a change in what is really there.

But, even with these points made, the question of our human moral responsibility to the rest of nature remains much harder to address, especially from an educational perspective, if we do not indulge ourselves by applying our own conceptual frameworks, our ideas about justice, progress and so on, through the imagined eyes of other creatures – prey and preying alike. The intellectual difficulties that result are a price worth paying for the shock this form of abnormal discourse delivers to the much more widespread, but clearly unsatisfactory view that all that matters is our own personal utility. Further, by doing this Kopnina and Cherniak's paper raises a number of other concerns that it shares with the other authors.

Citizenship

Citizenship is a key issue for all four papers. Whose views count? More than that, do the ways in which individual views are elicited about particular matters – matters pronounced within the normal discourse to be the ones that matter – divert attention from other concerns that people might legitimately have about, for example, social justice, environmental sustainability or the nature of a good life? Is environmental advocacy a legitimate means to correct an enduring democratic deficit, or a form of indoctrination that subverts democracy by its very nature? Pashby and Andreotti explore a cross-section of these issues through a focus on internationalisation in higher education. Sund, and Van Poeck et al., each bring empirical research to bear, the former through a study of six teachers and the latter through three case studies. Of course, digging down to the level of practical

specifics leads to further complexities which then, in turn, further shape the argument more generally.

Pashby and Andreotti, citing the work of Mignolo, make the disturbing point that modernity has a light side that could not exist without a corresponding dark side. It may well be – and it behoves us to think this through carefully – that the benefits of living in a developed economy, including the availability of well-equipped universities for some of us to work in – are always paid for with stolen gold. Hence, through a range of processes among which the internationalisation of higher education is but one, the rich world offers to fix the problems it has caused everyone else using the very assumptions, beliefs and techniques – the normal discourse – that caused them. This is clearly a most complex issue. I would simply like to make three observations that may be found helpful. Firstly, John Foster (2008) has argued in considerable, cross-disciplinary detail that sustainability (or sustainable development) has become little more than a comforting distraction from the real issues. We busy ourselves measuring this or theorising that, because we lack the will or power to do anything more effective. Sustainability has become the normal discourse. If this is so then clearly the exporting of the concept through internationalisation will only serve the interests of those who may benefit, at least for now, from inaction.

Secondly, Pashby and Andreotti (p. xxx) note three ‘discursive orientations’ in relation to their topic – neoliberal, liberal and critical – and claim that they all are attached to totalizing forms of knowledge production where more and more rigorous interventions (particularly in a critical orientation), based on the same systems of knowledge out of which global problems emerged, will solve those very problems. Chet Bowers (1993) made this same point using the opposed concepts of industrial and ecological root metaphors, and it is good to see his core insight developed in a contemporary context.

Thirdly, it may be true that modernity has caused many of the world’s problems (though, as I have argued elsewhere [e.g. Gough, 2009], this has little to do with ‘market logic’, whatever that may be) but a little caution is in order before any of us (academics, educationalists, NGO staff, whosoever) assumes that we now stand above the modernism that has produced us, and can therefore offer solutions to everyone else. As Edward Said (1985) pointed out, the rest of the world is often just as marginalised by the self-assured designs of rich countries to undo the colonial misdeeds of the past as it was by those misdeeds themselves.

However, all four of the papers presently under discussion show awareness of this last point. Pashby and Andreotti advocate an ethical response, and on that basis they suggest a post-colonial perspective for getting to grips with the complexities of specific realities. Sund applies the post-colonial perspective and develops an analytical tool, hinting at forms of complexity that are also examined by Van Poeck et al. (p. xxx), who write: “What comes to the fore, then, is that in order to take care of an issue, one cannot ignore the effects this has on the other actors caught up in it”. They continue (p. xxx) by arguing for a form of education “where facts and values can emerge in their interconnectedness”.

It is a radical thought, at least in the context of environmental education, but an effective device already exists for accounting the multiple effects of individual actions on other individuals *and* giving appropriate weight to both facts and values. It is called ‘the market’. The philosopher Ronald Dworkin (2000) has shown how the device of the market can not only be made to serve the goal of

equality of resources, but is in fact indispensable to such a goal. Meanwhile, others such as Mark Pennington (2011) have noted that while the evils of neoliberalism are routinely laid at the door of 'the free market', it is a measurable fact that, under neoliberalism, regulation of almost everything – and perhaps most particularly education – has actually increased. Might 'market forces' simply be a straw man, set up to distract us from the real injustices of our time? Few will think so. For my part, I am grateful to these excellent papers, which together achieve a successful integration of the abstract and the empirical, for prompting me to make so heretical a challenge to the normal discourse of environmental education research.

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